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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication can be viewed in terms of an aggressive-nonaggressive continuum. Past research has often focused on nonaggressive forms of interpersonal communication, such as understanding how people get to know one another, how trust and intimacy develop, and the role of self-disclosure in relationship development. However, increasing interest has been directed toward aggressive forms of communication. Aggressive interpersonal communication involves either a physical or a symbolic attack. When aggressive communication is examined in terms of a constructive-destructive continuum, aggressive behavior may be viewed as constructive if it facilitates communication satisfaction and destructive if it produces dissatisfaction. The prevalent constructive types of physical aggression in interpersonal relationships are social, including sports and games; and task, urging other people to complete tasks more quickly. Types of physical aggression that are almost always destructive include violence against persons and violence against objects. Among the prevalent types of symbolic aggression are assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness. It is possible to construe a personality profile based on a person's aggressive behavior. Further study suggests that aggression leading to violence may be reduced by increasing an individual's level of argumentative competency. (DF)

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A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

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A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

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Paper presented to the Eastern Communication Association annual convention, May 1, 1986, Atlantic City, New Jersey.

A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication may be viewed in terms of an aggressive-nonaggressive continuum. Nonaggressive forms have received considerable attention in contemporary studies of interpersonal communication. Emphasis has been placed on understanding how people get to know one another, how trust and intimacy develop, the role of self-disclosure in relationship development, the components of interpersonal communication competence, stages of relationship development and deterioration, how our interpersonal construct systems influence communication, to mention just some of the lines of research.

Increasing interest has been directed at the aggressive side of the continuum. The Speech Communication Association sponsored book, Perspectives on Communication and Social Conflict (Miller & Simons, 1974), perhaps was a major factor in stimulating this direction. Subsequent research has focus on compliance-gaining tactics in interpersonal communication, resisting persuasion, arguing, and verbal aggression.

An aggressive interpersonal behavior involves attack, physical and/or symbolic in order, minimally to dominate and perhaps damage, or maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack (Infante, in press a). The locus of attack in interpersonal communication situations can be a variety of things, a person's body, behavior, material possessions, self-concept, or positions on topics of communication.

Aggressiveness in interpersonal communication comes in many forms, e.g., an argument about a controversial issue, a mock assault, a physical contest, pressuring a person to do something, trying to make a person feel foolish, expressing irritability, ventilating frustrations, physical aggression.

These behaviors have characteristics which distinguish them from nonaggressive forms of communication. More than minimal force is applied to someone. The individuals experience physiological arousal such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure. They may experience intense anger, extreme determination, exert great effort, and have a high level of alertness and awareness. Attack and defend cognitive orientations are assumed. The behaviors are decidedly active as opposed to passive, attention-getting rather than commonplace, and potentially instigative of further aggression (Infante, in press a).

Constructive-Destructive Aggression

It is meaningful to view aggressive communication along a constructive-destructive continuum. Generally, an aggressive behavior may be viewed as constructive if it facilitates interpersonal communication satisfaction, and enhances a dyadic relationship by increasing understanding, empathy, and intimacy. On the other hand, a behavior may be judged as destructive if it produces dissatisfaction, if at least one person in the dyad feels less favorable about self, and if the quality of the relationship is reduced (Infante, in press a).

There are at least four perspectives which may be taken in determining whether an act is constructive or destructive: the individual, the dyad, observer, society. Thus, an act may be viewed as constructive by one person in a dyad but destructive by the other person. From the perspective of the dyad an act may be constructive or destructive, depending upon its congruence with what the dyad has defined as constructive or destructive. Observers of a dyad may judge whether an act is constructive or destructive. Of course, such judgments may be noncorrespondent with the individual or dyadic judgments Finally, an act may be said to be constructive or destructive if it is consistent with societal standards, such as laws, for defining what is constructive or destructive interpersonal behavior.

Determining whether an act is constructive or not can be a complex matter

if there are judgmental differences among these four perspectives, e.g., two individuals may feel an act is constructive but an observer may view it as destructive. It does not appear defensible to ignore any of the perspectives. Thus, to avoid the undesirability of an overly simplistic approach to the issue, all four perspectives should be considered in assigning meaning to aggressive interpersonal acts.

Types of Aggression in Interpersonal Communication

Following Buss' (1971) thinking it is useful to make a distinction in terms of physical aggression versus symbolic aggression. Either form can occur in interpersonal relations and can be constructive of destructive. Physical aggression, in terms of our definition of aggression presented earlier, involves using one's body or extensions of the body (e.g., a gun) to apply force to another person in order minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage, or maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack.

The predominately constuctive types of physical aggression in interpersonal relationships are social and task. (Infante, in press a). Social physical aggression includes sports, games, and playfulness such as mock assaults. Thus, a constructive use of a gun could be a trapshooting contest. The task dimension entails completing a job or project with another person aggressively, e.g., speeding production so the other person is forced to work faster, destroying physical impediments to task completion. Of course, these can be destructive, if, for example, a sport such as tennis is used to humiliate another person, or if pushing a person on the job created feelings of inadequacy.

The types of physical aggression which are almost always destructive include violence against persons (e.g., wife-beating) and violence against objects (e.g., throwing a dish). Although difficult to imagine, these types

can be constructive under certain circumstances. For example, a husband and wife slapping each other as the culmination of a long period of suspicion, resentment, and bitterness could shock both of them into seeing a marriage counselor which eventually could result in a better marriage, i.e., physical aggression can have therapeutic value.

Symbolic aggression involves using messages in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage, or maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy another person's positions on topics of communication and/or the person's self-concept. Like physical aggression, symbolic aggression entails attack and defense, and can have the intention of destroying something. However, while physical aggression accomplishes its effects mainly by the use of bodily force, symbolic aggression involves using the body to manipulate symbols. Symbolic aggression can function as a substitute for physical aggression. When there are situational factors which inhibit the use of physical aggression individuals sometimes resort to cursing, insults, threats, etc. Symbolic aggression sometimes is used as a means to physical aggression. We will examine later the idea that symbolic aggression can instigate physical aggression. Some people use symbolic aggression because they are not able or are not willing to use physical aggression. Finally, symbolic aggression can be constructive and can be the best way of solving a problem or resolving an issue.

The Aggressive Personality

The types of symbolic aggression in interpersonal communication can be understood by identifying the aspects of the individual's personality which control symbolic aggression. The aggressiveness portion of personality may be viewed as a multidimensional structure of four traits: assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness. The expression of

each trait produces a distinct and easily recognized form of symbolic aggression.

Assertiveness, along the lines of Costa and McCrae's (1980) trait model of personality, may be conceptualized as the general tendency to be interpersonally dominant, ascendant, and forceful. This probably is not a unidimensional trait since Lorr and More (1980) identified four dimensions of assertive behavior: leadership, social, defense of rights, anti-conformity.

Argumentativeness is the tendency to recognize controversial issues in communication situations, to present and defend positions un the issues, and to attack the positions which other people take (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Argumentativeness may be considered a subset of assertiveness in that all arguing is assertive, but not all assertiveness involves arguing.

Hostility is conceived by Costa and McCrae (1980) as a generalization of the affect, anger. This is consistent with Buss and Durkee's (1957) multidimensional conception of hostility as a trait which involves the use of symbols to express irritability, negativism, resentment, and suspicion.

Verbal aggression is defined as the tendency to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication (Infante & Wigley, in press). As with assertiveness and argumentativeness, a set-subset relation would seem to be the case for hostility and verbal aggressiveness. That is, all verbal aggression is hostile, but not all hositlity involves attacking the self-concepts of other people.

These four traits, therefore suggest four distinct types of symbolic aggression. The four traits are relatively independent (Infante, in press a) so a person's positions on the four traits can be quite divergent. Thus, the aggressive personality can take numerous forms. For instance, a person may be low in assertiveness, like to argue and use verbal aggression, but be otherwise low in hostility. Another pattern would be a person who is assertive, but low in the

other three traits. Still another would be the individual who is assertive and argumentative but not hostile or verbally aggressive.

Aggressiveness and the Structure of Personality

The aggressive personality may be related to the total personality by positioning it within the structure of Costa and McCrae's (1980) trait model of personality. This will provide a part-to-whole perspective which, in time, may provide insights into how communication training affects the total personality. Murray (1937) speculated on numerous ways that communication education enhances the student's personality.

Costa and McCrae (1980) analyzed the traits posited by personality models and concluded that personality is structured around three major dimensions, each having six facets: Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Openness.

Assertiveness is one of the six facets of Extraversion, along with attachment, gregariousness, excitement-seeking, positive emotions, and activity. Argumentativeness, as a subset of assertiveness, is therefore a part of the Extraversion dimension of personality.

Hostility is a facet in the Neuroticism dimension, in addition to anxiety, depression, self-consciousness, vulnerability, and impulsiveness. As a side of hostility, it seems clear that verbal aggressiveness is a part of Neurnticism.

The six facets of Openness are phantasy, esthetics, feelings, action, ideas, and values. Although not yet established, an aggressiveness component may be important in the Openness dimension, especially with regard to feelings. That is, expressing favorable feelings about another person, or praise, may be viewed as an aggressive act because of the expression of praise is generally difficult. A tendency to praise may be viewed as the opposite of verbal

aggressiveness, and further would be a constructive trait since favorable feedback enhances the receiver's self-concept (Infante, 1976).

The Extraversion and Neuroticism dimensions of personality are assumed to be independent. Since assertiveness is in the former and hostility in the latter, these two aggressive traits also should be independent. A study by Galassi and Galassi (1975) supported this idea. They found assertiveness shared little variance with the Buss and Durkee (1957) multidimensional measure of hostility. Research by Lorr and More (1980) also supports the predicted independence.

Further, since assertiveness and hostility appear to be independent, then argumentativeness as a side of assertiveness and verbal aggressiveness as a side of hostility also should be independent. Factor analytic studies have supported this expectation (Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante & Wigley, in press). This suggests that arguing is not the same as verbal aggression. Some individuals, especially those who are low in argumentativeness, and hence less skilled at arguing (Infante, 1981), tend to confuse argument with verbal aggression (Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985).

The Validity of a Personality Approach

According to Mischel (1968), "Personality is an abstraction or hypothetical construction from or about behavior" (p. 4). Shontz (1965) said the study of "personality is identified by its concern for inferred mediational processes that account for organization in the behavior of the individual" (p. 7). Thus, a personality approach to understanding aggressiveness in communication specifies hypothetical constructs which mediate aggressive behavior. These constructs are derived from aggressive behavior and are expected to account for aggressive behavior. The validity of such an approach ultimately rests

with the ability of measures of the hypothetical constructs to predict aggressive behavior as specified by the nomological network for the constructs. A number of studies have provided such support (Infante, 1981; Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984; Infante, Wall, Leap, & Danielson, 1984; Infante & Gorden, 1985a, 1985b; Infante, 1985; Rancer & Dierks-Stewart, 1985; Infante & Wigley, in press).

A more global approach to the matter of the validity of a personality approach to aggression is to address the validity of a trait approach to understanding communication. Infante (in press b) recently maintained that the controversy in psychology over the cross-situational consistency of behavior has clarified the justification for a trait approach to communication, and, further, has provided direction for enhancing the prediction of communication.

The cross-situational consistency issue involves the argument that personality is overwhelmed by the myriad of factors in a given situation. This results in behaviors across situation being not very consistent and hence not predicted well by a personality trait (Mischel, 1968, 1969; Bem & Allen, 1974). Mischel (1968) posited that $\underline{r} = .30$ and thus $\underline{r}^2 = .09$ might be the upper limit for the true variance in behavior which is explained by personality. This position, in essence, denies the concept of personality and replaces it with a situational account of behavior. A situational approach is atomistic in that it focuses on studying individual behaviors and how the myriad of factors in a situation influence the behavior. Some research has supported the situationist's position (for summaries see: Epstein, 1979b: Mannusson & Endler, 1977; Bowers, 1973). However, in the ensuing intellectual clashes between trait theorists and the situationists, the weight of evidence and reasoning appears to have aligned with the trait posit on (see Infante, in press a, for a review of this evidence and reasoning).

Berkowitz (1962) clarified the issue in discussing the aggresive personality. He said having a trait means being extremely sensitive to a class of stimuli,

and not that a person will exhibit a behavior incessantly. Traits determine what the person finds rewarding and would prefer doing. However, there are several reasons why a person who has a strong aggressiveness trait, for instance, will not always behave aggressively, why cross-situational consistency will not be extremely high: (1) aggressive cues may be absent or weak in some situations; (2) aggression inhibitors such as punishment for hostile action are present in some situations more than others; (3) needs which are incompatible with aggressive behavior such as affiliation are especially important in some situations; (4) persons may want to perform a hostile act but doubt their ability to complete the act successfully. The principle here should apply to all personality traits -- how the situation is perceived interacts with traits to produce behavior in the situation.

Although people are not incessant regarding a class of behaviors from one situation to the next, there is a degree of continuity in behavior over a long period of time which clearly supports the meaningfulness of the concept of personality. A good deal of evidence supports this claim. Block (1971, 1981) conducted longitudinal studies of a group of individuals from when they were adolescents until they were from 42-49 years of age. A very large amount of data, from a wide variety of instruments and observational methods, was gathered for each subject at four points in time. The results revealed considerable support for the continuity position. For example, people who were assertive at the age of 13 were still assertive at 49. Costa and McCrae (1980) also conducted rigorous longitudinal studies and reported very convincing evidence of the stability of personality. A series of studies by Epstein (1979b) is particularly impressive. He found when a behavior is examined over periods of from several days to several weeks, consistencies are apparent which warrant trait designations. Stagner (1979) reviewed a large amount of literature which indicates that traits permit

accurate and also useful predictions of behavior. He maintained his review of research established "that atomistic approaches to human behavior are inadequate because they do not take account of existing research on traits" (Stagner, 1977, p. 204).

An idea which has emerged from the cross situational consistency issue is that a personality trait is not a strong predictor of response in a single situation(i.e., r = .30 is usual) but is very predictive of patterns of behavior over time and averages of large numbers of behaviors. Numerous studies support this idea (Fishbein & Ajzen 1974: Jaccard, 1974; McGowan & Gormly, 1976; Weigel & Newman, 1976; Daly, 1978; Epstein, 1979b; Jaccard & Daly 1980).

Why, then, have some studies failed to find consistencies? One explanation, according to Block (1981) is that the studies have been methodologically flawed. Epstein (1979a) also criticized the laboratory procedures used in studies which did not find consistency. He said a major problem was the variables manipulated probably were meaningless to subjects. Further, studies did not examine enough behaviors to allow consistency patterns to emerge (Epstein, 1979b).

The controversy over cross-situaitonal consistency was valuable because it stimulated research and analysis which seems to have settled the issue. A trait approach to understanding behavior is valid. This evidence concerning validity is important to the field of communication because it pertains to the vast literature on communication traits.

The positions taken by trait and situational proponents are not mutually exclusive and may be fused into a more intermediate position which has been termed interactionist (Andersen, 1984; Epstein, 1979b; Magnusson & Endler, 1977). In terms of this view behavior in a situation represents an interaction of the individual and the variables in the situation; their mutual influence results in behavior which is not totally predicted by either trait or situational factors, but is a product of both. Epstein (1979b) expressed the position clearly:

"According to the interactionist position, the question of which is more important, the situation or the person, is a meaningless one, as behavior is always a joint function of the person and the situation" (p. 1101).

The interactionist approach is appealing and seems intuitively valid. In a recent article (Infante, in press b) I developed the contention that the field of communication should move toward models which are more interactionist in nature, and I demonstrated the utility of this notion by testing an interactionist theory of argumentativeness (Infante & Rancer, 1982).

Symbolic Aggression and Violence

Viewing verbal aggression as an interpersonal construct seems especially important since theorists such as Berkowitz (1962, p. 118) explain that impulsive violence often begins with verbal aggression; rage is aroused and mounts as the verbal aggression continues, and culminates with physical aggression. Other researchers support this interpretation (Toch, 1969; Patterson & Cobb, 1973). Zillman (1979, p. 301) pointed out that murders are commonly preceded by verbal aggression.

Felson's (1978, 1982, 1984) impression management theory of violence clarifies the motivational basis for the relationship between verbal and physical aggression. According to this analysis individuals are strongly motivated to maintain a favorable image in social situations and will go to extreme lengths to restore a damaged image. Verbal aggression, such as insults, portays the receiver in a negative light and the person retaliates in order to save face and also to prevent a future attack on self. Retaliation can be in the form of reciprocated verbal aggression, or physical aggression. The probability of retaliation is higher when the receiver perceives the verbal attack was illegitimate, intentional, and a third party observed the attack (Felson, 1978, 1982,

1984).

In terms of Infante and Wigley's (in press) interpersonal model of verbal aggression, a verbally aggressive attack produces psychological pain because of self-concept damage. Reciprocity results from an attack impulse to stop the pain by damaging the source of pain. Self-concept damage can be repaired if the individual believes retaliation took courage and if the person feels the counter-attack confirmed one's ability to care for and defend self. Thus, retaliation can engender pride which eradicates the effects of being victimized by verbal aggression.

All verbal aggression does not lead to physical violence. However, there is little research illuminating the types of verbally aggressive behavior, along with the situational factors, which increase the likelihood of violence. Toch's (1969) study of violent criminals found that aspersions about one's manly status were particularly potent in provoking physical violence. Toch said the violent criminals he interviewed generally had very inadequate verbal skills. When confronted with social conflict they did not know what to say and resorted to insult which usually produced predictable results, further aggression. Other research (Gelles, 1974; Coleman, 1980) suggests violence by husbands is sometimes preceded by the wife's use of verbal aggression. Although the research is this area is somewhat sparse, it does suggest the general model that physical violence usually begins with verbal and/or gestural exchanges (Hepburn, 1973). Moreover, the probability of verbal attack leading to physical violence increases when the individuals lack the verbal skills for managing conflict.

Aggression and the Inability to Argue Constructively

The idea of lacking verbal skills for dealing with conflict may be interpreted as the inability to argue constructively. Skill in argumentation may be a crucial

factor in determining whether verbal aggression occurs and whether it intensifies to the point where violence commences. According to a recent analysis (Infante, in press a) verbal aggression is more likely in conflict situations where individuals do not know how to argue skillfully.

This idea has grown out of my research over the past several years. This explanation posits that when communication in a situation turns to a topic where at least two persons express conflicting positions, each individual adopts an "attack-and-defend" orientaion. That is, attention is focused primarily on two tasks, attacking the position which the other person has taken and defending one's own position. Now, if the individuals are not skilled in the art of argument they soon run out of things to say in defense of their positions. They still experience the need to defend, but they are unable to defend their positions. So, they set up a defense around the next closest thing to other position on the issue--self. Thus, when an opponent says something against the person's position, he or she interprets, this as a personal attack. That is, the person mistakes a genuine argument for verbal aggression, i.e., "takes it very personally." This may provoke the person to be verbally aggressive toward his or her opponent, because it is believed, the opponent deserves it. If the opponent reciprocates this use of verbal aggression, a verbal fight could begin. Both individuals would believe the other person "fired the first shot."

The need to attack is similarly corrupted. If individuals are not skillful arguers, they soon exhaust what they have to say against the opponent's position. However, the need to attack still remains. So, if unable to attack the opponent's position, the unskilled arguer tends to redirect the attack at the next closest target--the opponent.

This analysis suggests verbal aggression and hence violence may be reduced by increasing the individuals level of argumentative competency. Teaching a

person the art of arguing constructively may provide the individual with an opportunity to develop a preference for rational discourse in conflict situations. The pedagogy for this is very thoroughly developed, having evolved over 2500 years since the time of Ancient Greece. It is not a matter of determining how to create competent arguers, but whether the communication discipline is willing to emerge from the placid world of platform speaking, friendly conversation, and group discussion, and begin to grapple with the difficult problems which result when people do not know how to deal constructively with social conflict.

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